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AUTHOR Spruill, Jo Anna; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Four related research studies examined the transition of Maine special education students from high school to community and work. (1) A statewide survey of Maine special education teachers and administrators and vocational counselors found that significant gaps existed in transitional services provided to handicapped secondary school students, in accessibility to vocational training, and in assessment of student needs. Many professionals indicated unfamiliarity with the Carl Perkins Act and federal requirements for providing transition services. (2) Of 57 rural special educators who responded to a survey in northern Maine, over 75% reported that special needs students had access to special vocational education programs, particularly auto mechanics, auto body, and food services, but only 30% reported that community based training programs were available to these students. (3) Twelve educators interviewed in three rural and suburban school districts felt that school-based deficits and handicapped students' characteristics contributed equally to transition problems; considered community vocational programs for special needs students to be highly beneficial but difficult to implement; and identified staff training needs. (4) Telephone surveys of 23 special education high school graduates or their close relatives found that 16 had received life skills, career, or vocational training; 7 had held school-related jobs, but only 4 held jobs that were community based; 15 were presently employed; and 5 were earning more than \$5.00 per hour. These results demonstrate that Maine school professionals have little training in and only initial understanding of the transition process, and that schools are not effective in training special needs students for jobs above the minimum wage level. (SV)

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Jo Anna Spruill
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh
403 Nursing/Education Building
Oshkosh, WI 54901

Libby G. Cohen
University of Southern Maine
407 Bailey Hall
Gorham, Maine 04038

Linda Hawkins
P.O. Box 691
Mars Hill, Maine 04758

Cyrene Slegona
Box 5
S. Casco, Maine 04077

The Transition of Secondary Age Students in Maine
from High School to the Community

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The Transition of Secondary Age Students in Maine from High School to the Community

A review of recent literature on employment outcomes and independent living adjustment of special needs youth (Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning 1985; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985;; Hasazi, et al., 1985; Wehman, Kregel, & Seyfarth, 1985) suggests that improvements are needed in the provision of vocational training and transitional services to handicapped youth. These studies found a general condition of underemployment of special needs graduates or school leavers, low pay for those employed, and poor access to the usual job related fringe benefits. There were also indications of under-utilization of community services, which are needed for job finding by moderately to severely retarded school leavers. The authors of one study (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985) suggested that certain experiences were more likely to predict successful employment outcomes. These included graduating from high school, participating in vocational education programs, and working during the summer and at part-time jobs during the school year.

Madeline Will (1984) has defined the term transition as an outcome oriented process and which includes a wide variety of services and experiences which will vary widely and will be unique to the individual.

A series of four research studies were conducted which examined how the transition process was being implemented in Maine. These studies were meant to complement each other and to produce results that could be synthesized into a broad statewide view of the transition process. Each of the four studies was descriptive in nature. These studies were: 1) a statewide survey of school districts which examined how schools were implementing the transition process; 2) a survey of transition practices in a rural and remote area of northern Maine; 3) an interview study of educators in three rural school districts in southern Maine; and, 4) a follow up study of special education school leavers in two of the rural districts. Our purpose in conducting these related studies, was to obtain an overview of practices relating to transition in order to identify needs and make recommendations for policy makers, teacher trainers, and practitioners.

Study 1: Statewide Survey of Secondary Transition Services

In order to examine statewide practices in the area of transition, a questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of educators in Maine which inquired about their general knowledge of transition practices and the steps their schools were taking to meet the transition needs of secondary age students with handicaps.

Before the mailing, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of teachers. Thirty percent (30%) of the questionnaires were returned. The majority of the respondents were special education department chairpersons and teachers (46%), followed by guidance and vocational counselors (28%), and special education directors (12%).

Vocational Education Training

Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the respondents reported that secondary level special education students have access to regular vocational education programs. In terms of specific vocational areas, 74% of the respondents reported that students were mainstreamed into carpentry programs; food service, 62%; auto mechanics, 59%; child care programs, 49%; auto body repair, 43%; with lower percentages, 20% to 7%, enrolled in areas such as data processing, electronics, horticulture, masonry and plumbing.

Seventy-five percent (75%) of the respondents stated that secondary special needs students had access to special vocational education programs. Special career training included food services, 44%; carpentry, 34%; automotives, 29%; maintenance, 28%; health services, 23%; horticulture, 20%; retail occupations, 20%; and, general trades, 16%.

Fifty percent (50%) of those surveyed reported that there were community-based training programs available to secondary level special needs students in a limited range of programs. Programs were reported accessible at rates of 26% in food services to 5% in masonry.

It appears that many of the vocational training opportunities for special needs students are available through regular vocational education programs and that, overall, job training accessibility is aimed at traditional entry level positions. However, fifty percent (50%) of the respondents considered vocational training as the high school special education teachers' responsibility. Thus, it seems that although some vocational training is available to students with special needs in regular vocational settings, the responsibility for providing it falls to the special education teacher.

Carl Perkins Act

Several questions inquired about the respondents' knowledge of the Carl Perkins Act. About two-thirds of the respondents seemed to be unaware of the legal aspects of the Carl Perkins Act. They reported that the Carl Perkins Act had not directly affected their jobs or the special education programs in their schools.

Seventy-four percent (74%) of the respondents felt vocational assessment information was helpful in planning and programming for special needs students, but the respondents reported specific types of assessments were conducted at the following rates: vocational interest assessment - 69%; vocational abilities assessment - 46%;

vocational special needs assessment - 40.0%. One interpretation of these data may be that the professionals surveyed felt that vocational information is desirable, but that the most crucial information - that of relating the students' abilities and special needs to training - is often not being gathered and not considered when programming decisions are being made.

Transition Activities

Seventy-one percent (71%) of the respondents reported that transition related activities were provided for special needs students. The majority of these activities revolved around the initial phases of transition, with contacts to identify rehabilitation counselors most frequently reported. Other transition process activities were reported far less frequently

Professional Training

Some of the deficits in programming and services for special needs youth may be traced to the professionals' lack of training in the area of transition. Overall, the statewide sample of educators reported taking secondary special education or transition courses as follows: 0 courses - 36%; 1 to 2 courses - 34%; 3 to 4 courses - 21%; and, more than 4 courses - 9%. Forty-seven percent (47%) of counselors, 59% of special education directors, and 40% of high school special education department chairpersons reported taking no secondary special education courses at all.

Conclusion

An analysis of the data from this statewide survey indicates that significant gaps exist in services provided, accessibility to vocational training, and assessment of student needs. Many professionals indicated unfamiliarity with the federal requirements for providing transition services. This, along with the large number of respondents who indicated little or no training in this area may explain why these gaps exist. An alternate interpretation may be that there are other reasons why these gaps exist.

Study 2: Regional Survey of Transition Practices

A study similar to Study 1 was conducted in a rural and remote area of northern Maine. A questionnaire, slightly modified to take into consideration certain demographic characteristics was mailed to all of the special education teachers, secondary principals, guidance/vocational counselors, and special education directors. The 57 subjects, or 59% of those who were included in the mailing, returned the questionnaire.

Vocational Education Training

Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the respondents indicated that secondary students with special needs had access to regular vocational programs and 75% reported that students had access to special vocational education programs. A majority of the respondents reported that the students were enrolled in the regular education programs of auto mechanics, auto body, and food services. A far smaller percentage reported that the students were enrolled in data processing (7%), masonry (9%), and drafting (7%).

Almost 30% of the respondents reported that community based training programs were available for students with special needs. This is somewhat lower than the 50% reported in Study 1, the statewide survey. Special needs students were reported to be enrolled most frequently in food services (16%), health occupations (14%), and carpentry (12%).

Conclusion

In general, the respondents in northern Maine seemed to follow the trends established in the statewide survey. It would be helpful to explore why students pursue certain types of vocational training and how these decisions are made. Do the schools systematically assess the vocational training needs of their students who have special needs? Are student needs matched with appropriate training and with the needs of the labor market in this rural area? Why do certain types of training (e.g., automotives, food services) have a much larger percentage of students than other areas? Finally, why are not community based training opportunities, which are particularly suited for rural areas, more extensively developed?

Study 3: Practices and Attitudes

For the third study, we sought to examine in-depth public school transition practices for handicapped students in three suburban/rural school districts. Structured interviews, lasting a maximum one hour in length, were conducted by trained interviewers with the high school principal, a guidance counselor, the district special education director, and a high school special education teacher in each of three districts. These districts were chosen because they were judged to be representative of school districts in Maine. A total of twelve professionals were interviewed. Data from the interviews were collected through notetaking and by tape recording. The data were transcribed, tabulated, and analyzed. The following summary focuses on data concerning professional attitudes.

Professional Attitudes

In an effort to determine attitudes and opinions of school professionals which may influence practices and outcomes, several questions in this area were included.

Barriers to Vocational Education - When asked what they considered the main barrier to providing vocational training for higher level jobs, the respondents were fairly evenly divided between school-based deficits and the students' handicapping conditions. School deficits cited included lack of staff, facilities, funds, program direction, and limited training opportunities for staff. The students' characteristics were mentioned with regard to ability, motivation, and need for special support services. Lack of acceptance by the larger community was also mentioned.

Community-Based Programs The interviewees enthusiastically supported community-based vocational programs for special needs youth because they considered them appropriate for the students and beneficial to the school and the greater community. Their reasons included that "[the students] will live and work in the area;" "[they will] get a realistic picture of work expectations"; and, "[they] learn how they fit in." The interviewees felt that community-based training would foster awareness and sensitivity to the needs of a handicapped population, as well as communication between school and community. They also expressed reservations about putting this type of training into operation: they would need to start small, have appropriate sites, provide many school and agency support services, and solve transportation problems.

Educating Severely Handicapped - Most of the interviewees expressed enthusiastic support for integrating students with severe handicaps into the high school, but they had a number of concerns about implementing such a policy. These concerns related to the severity of handicapping condition, adequacy of programming, funds, planning and preparation, staff training, and social acceptance.

Barriers - When asked specifically what the barriers were to educating students who were severely disabled at the high school in their district, the interviewees cited deficits of the setting, such as inadequate facilities, and crowded classes; the competitiveness of the high school; limited peer opportunities; and limited program options. Lack of social acceptance, seen as another barrier, was thought to emanate from overburdened teachers, negative staff attitudes, and ignorance and fear in the school and community. Others believed that the limited capabilities of the students, their inability to compete, and the time it takes them to learn, were the greatest barriers to integration. Other student limitations were inability to get around, slow rate of speaking, seizures, and inappropriate behaviors or appearance.

General Comments

Overall, the interviewees expressed concerned and cautious optimism. They made numerous responses referring to handicapping conditions, indicating reservations or emphasizing drawbacks; but, they were also positive in their support/acceptance for integration. They were not, however, so sure about others. There was a consensus that additional training was needed to improve the current level of programming and especially to prepare others for the integration of severely handicapped individuals into the public high schools. They identified training needs in the areas of job development, vocational assessment counseling, networking and task analysis. Since the subjects, too, had taken few, if any secondary special education courses, they had largely gained their transition expertise through experience and inservice training. The respondents preferred to meet their present and future training needs through workshops, inservice training, and course work.

Study 4: Employment Outcome Study

The final study was an employment outcome study of identified special education high school graduates between the years 1983 to 1987 in two of the school districts in which the interviews were conducted. The survey instrument was a modified version the Vermont outcome survey tool (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985). Telephone interviews were conducted; informants included the former students or a close relative.

Background Data

Data were collected on 23 school-leavers; all were graduates, 14 were female and 9 were male. Fifty percent (50%) had graduated at age 18; 29% at age 19; and 17% at age 20 years. At the time of graduation, 8 were identified as learning disabled; 12 were labelled mentally retarded, and in 3 cases, a label was not ascertained. At the time of the survey, 18 of the former special education students were single and 5 were married. Sixteen (16) individuals reported living with relatives and 7 reported that they were living independently. All of the students reported some form of vocational or life skills education. The majority had pursued programs in home economics., trade & industrial, and health occupations.

Work Experiences

The subjects responded to questions regarding jobs the students had during the summer while attending school. Eleven (11) of the students did not hold summer jobs; three (3) of the students held subsidized summer jobs, and 9 held nonsubsidized summer jobs.

Fourteen (14) of the students did not hold jobs during the school year. Five (5) of the students found jobs with the help of family members; 2 found the jobs with help of professionals; and 2 found jobs on their own.

Regarding work experiences during their school programs, 7 of the former students held school related jobs at the high school; 1 in the community and 3 in both the high school and the community. Of the workers, all reported working at a job for more than 6 months. Sixteen (16) students reported that they received life skills, career education, or vocational education during high school. They reported training in one or more of the following areas: occupational education, home economics, trade and industrial education, health occupation, agriculture, business education, marketing and distribution education, industrial arts, consumer education, and home economics.

Employment Status

When asked what they are doing now, 15 of the former students reported that they are employed (11 full-time, 4 part-time, and 1 at a seasonal job). By handicapping condition, all of the students identified as learning disabled (LD) were employed and all but 2 of these of these former students got the job by themselves. Five (5) of the individuals who were LD were earning more than \$5.00 per hour at the time they were surveyed. Seven (7) of the students identified as mentally retarded reported being unemployed for a variety of reasons; and of those employed, none reported earning more than \$5.00 per hour. One was earning less than minimum wage, three were at minimum wage, and two were above.

Post Graduation Contacts

The subjects were queried about contacts the students may have had after school graduation with education, vocational training, and agency professionals. Only 1 student was reported to have taken a course at the high school; another student received job training at Goodwill Industries subsequent to graduation. Nine (9) students had agency contacts regarding jobs, but none of those contacts took place after high school.

Conclusion

These two school districts produced employment outcome data generally similar to the findings of other published studies (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985). All of the students received lifeskills career development programming, but only 66% of the graduates reported vocational training, 50% or less held paying jobs during school.

Perhaps most importantly, a scant 17% report community-based jobs. Most students were receiving minimum wage or less; only a few were paid higher than minimum wage. What impact did their secondary school preparation have on the employment status of the respondents? If success of employment is measured by type of job and wages earned, it appears that for the respondents in these two school districts, their secondary preparation had little effect on their employment status.

Synthesis of the Four Studies

When looked at together, the results of these four studies present a picture of what is occurring in Maine schools relative to the transition process. While school professionals revealed an initial understanding of the transition process, they were just beginning to be aware of their legal and educational responsibilities. Schools have been slow to implement policies and practices in a systematic manner which can assist secondary level special education students in making a successful transition from school to the community. The studies revealed that educators have had little training in transition, and it is unclear who has responsibility for which aspect of the process. It is evident that much more training is needed to assist educators in developing effective transition programs.

What about the students? The students were working in jobs that required little training and offer low wages. The outcome study suggests that schools are not effective in training students for jobs which are above the minimum wage level. The professionals cited deficits in program capabilities, within student deficits, and lack of community acceptance as the primary causes. In addition, many students are not being given the opportunity to take advantage of their legal right to extend their public education to the age of 20 years. (In Maine, special education students can remain in high school until they graduate, which usually occurs at the age 18 of years, or until they reach the age of 20, when they must leave school).

In order to prepare students to lead productive and meaningful lives, and lives which can contribute to society, schools need to be better able to deal with the transition process. It is evident that, in Maine, schools need to better able assess student training needs and to meet these training needs through a variety of approaches. Rural school systems, in particular, may be well suited to developing community-based vocations training over regional vocational programs. Special educational job specialists will be needed to survey the local job market, develop training sites, and make job placements that are tailored to the needs of these sparsely populated communities. The focus should be on matching the individual needs of youth with disabilities and the employment opportunities that the community has to offer.

The results of these studies suggest that additional research is needed in this area. It would be helpful to pursue the following questions: What types of transition policies, practices, and curricula are most effective? What types of training will be beneficial to prepare educators to assist these students? What are important markers of "success" for students once they leave school? How can families and schools best support students as they proceed through the transition process? Finally, longitudinal studies of school leavers need to be carried out.

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